

#197 MICHAEL LOWEY: USS *SHAW*

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller, and we're here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu. The date is December 4, 1991 and it's about eleven AM and we have here Mr. Michael Lowey. Mr. Lowey was a Gunner's Mate Third Class on the destroyer, USS *SHAW*. He was twenty years old at the time of the attack on December 7, 1941 and he's seventy years of age now. And Mr. Lowey, I really do want to thank you for joining us and taking the time to share your story with us today.

Michael Lowey (ML): You're welcome.

SH: Why don't we start by asking you how you got into the service?

ML: That's rather funny. I seen a movie one time and it had three or four big battleships, you know. I think it was a newsreel and it just impressed me. From then on, I think I was probably eleven or twelve years old, I knew I was going in the Navy. When I got to be eighteen, I went in. And as you can see, I stayed quite a while.

SH: You said you stayed for a long career.

ML: Yeah, thirty years, seven months.

SH: Great. Where did you do your basic training? Was that at the Great Lakes . . .

ML: No, Rhode Island.

SH: Rhode Island.

ML: Newport, Rhode Island, in the cold.

SH: What was your first assignment?

ML: USS *WYOMING*, in Norfolk. I was only on there, though, about three or four months and I got transferred from that and I went to a four-stacker, tin can, we were getting close to the war. And we were going to give those to England, but first we had to clean them up and make sure everything worked all right. So I was on there about three or four months. And then from there, I went to, I came to Pearl Harbor and went aboard the *SHAW*.

SH: Do you remember the name of that four-stacker?

ML: Yes, the *MacKENZIE*, number [DD]99.

SH: Ninety-nine. Did you sail? Did the British fleet take over in our port?

ML: No, we took it Halifax, Canada and turned it over there. And that's the last I ever -- I don't know what happened to it. They probably renamed it to something, you know. That's usually what happens, you give a ship to another country, they rename it. I don't know what they called it.

SH: I think you're correct.

ML: And they probably got sunk. I don't know what they -- I really have no idea what happened to that ship.

SH: You said you joined the *SHAW* afterwards, where did you join up with her?

ML: Here in Pearl.

SH: How did you get to Pearl?

ML: Oh, I came on a transport, but I don't remember what the name of that was. I came across from Halifax, and I don't remember how I got to the Brooklyn Navy yard, but that's where I went. And I didn't know where I was going yet, and I got orders to the *SHAW*, and I came across country by train and went on a Navy transport and came to Pearl, and that was . . .

SH: Do you recall when?

ML: Nineteen thirty-nine.

SH: Thirty-nine?

ML: No, '40, 1940.

SH: What kind of routine duties or assignment would the *SHAW* be doing those days?

ML: Oh, it was seaman. You know, I swabbed the deck, chipped paint, painted. Whatever they told me, I did it. Helped bring on stores, helped tie it up and get under way, untie it.

SH: When did you begin to specialize in gunnery?

ML: Oh, it was probably only three months or so after I got aboard the *SHAW* that I made it into the gunner's mate rate. And then when I made my first rating, and I was assigned to the number two guns as the gun captain, which means I was in charge of . . .

SH: Yeah, can you just describe . . .

ML: . . . training the crew in firing the gun. And making sure that part, you know, I had to make sure the crew knew what to do, and that they did it right, but it was also my job to see that the gun was always kept in good condition and ready to fire, when they were ready to fire.

SH: Was that unusual at all, that it sounds like you were relatively new to that specialty and yet you became gun captain. Were you very good at it?

ML: Well.

SH: Was it unusual?

ML: Well, I didn't make it to gun captain that quick. But you know, after I went into the gunner's mate game, then probably that was '40, and that was, you know, a year, there's a year in there that all this training went on. I used to --- whenever we'd do anything on the gun as a group, like if we'd fire, then

you had to disassemble the breach blocks and pull them out, clean them and you had to run a bore gage to the barrel to make sure that it was still the proper size. Usually it wasn't. You had a big, wire brush that you hooked on the handles and you just keep working that barrel until that gage would pass. That sometimes would take a couple, three days.

SH: And that was to clean out the residue?

ML: Yeah, when you fire a brass case, see, you always get a little bit left there. And that's where the bore gage has to pass. It's usually right where it sits, it's hot, you know, when it fires, it's hot. And some of it will anneal to the barrel and you have to get it out of there. Well . . .

SH: Go ahead.

ML: It's just that. It's just that was hard work. We'd be up there, you'd be there sometimes all day for -- sometimes you're lucky, you get it out in one day, sometimes two. You know, whatever. And of course, there's always other things you have. You have to be, you know, the most important things with any equipment is, as you probably well know, is lubrication. So you have, that's a primary thing and of course, being at sea, you've always got rust to worry about.

SH: Were those guns, or that particular one you were assigned to, do you recall, was that a dual purpose gun? I seem to recall some of them could and most of them could, but some of them could not elevate high up against the craft.

ML: Yeah, it was surface or air, I believe.

SH: Surface or air?

ML: Yeah.

SH: And that's where we were discussing before, this is the kind of turret that was covered in the front, but opened to the rear?

ML: Yeah. Well, in partly. Though, I always thought -- I knew you were going to ask me that sooner.

SH: Oh, that's all right.

ML: It seems to me that it didn't come back all the way. That picture you showed, I think it's not right. Because on the --- whenever you're firing a gun, you have a projectile which was on the bottom and they have to load this in a tray at the same time that it's wrapped up. Well this, if you're firing a projectile that has a fuse on it that has to be set, there was a little fuse setter right here, it held three projectiles. And that man had to bring that projectile round, put it in there and crank a handle. That's what set that fuse. Then you have another man that was continually matching the pointers so that the director is always telling him where to set that fuse before you fire. So that had to be open too. See, and I can't remember whether there was a door you opened to get to that or whether it was always open. I don't --- that's funny, I've spent over three years on that stupid gun, I can't remember that part.

SH: Well, frankly, those are probably the kinds of questions that can be answered by looking it up in a book somewhere else.

ML: Yeah sure.

SH: Maybe we should go on to get a little closer to the date of the attack. Do you recall any feelings of, you know, heightened tension or activity, or change in the routine, in the days or weeks immediately before the attack?

ML: Well, you know I never thought of that. I didn't. I had no idea that there was going to be an attack. I had no idea. No, I heard that tape at the *ARIZONA* that said there was a lot of practice going on. You know, and there was from the Airedales, the Air Force part of it. But --- and that's the thing I said Sunday morning. I was just coming out of the mess hall and I was going to go on watch at quarter to. And they started bombing. And the first thing that -- I don't know whether I said it or somebody else said -- "Damn Airedales are practicing on Sunday again." You know.

SH: Why don't --- let's get into that then, now, since you've led us there -- were you doing anything special the day or the night before? And you stayed on board that night?

ML: Yes.

SH: Did most of the crew stay on board?

ML: Yeah. If they went on shore, they usually come back . . .

SH: Come back.

ML: . . . you know, that night. In those days, I would say, at least on the *SHAW*, I would say at least seventy, seventy-five percent of the men were single, you know. And you didn't have much money either. So, if you went --- and of course, and another thing I don't really remember, whether Pearl Harbor was the homeport of the *SHAW*. If it had have been, then the wives and family could have been there, you see. But I don't recall that, not being married, it didn't bother me at the time. But most of the people that went ashore came back, you know, about midnight or one o'clock in the morning, something like that.

SH: So that morning, where did you normally sleep? Where were your quarters?

ML: My bunk was in the after part of the ship, right under the after part, the deck aft, you know. After, underneath that back gun back there. It was -- there was berthing under there.

SH: And that morning, when did you get up?

ML: Well, like I said, I got up a little early even though it was Sunday, because I had the four to eight, the eight to twelve watch, okay. So I left, got up, and went to breakfast and was just coming up to go on watch when they started bombing.

SH: When --- how did you first realize something was wrong?

ML: When I looked over at Ford Island it was burning. But you know, the first thing I see is these planes coming down and I don't know who said it, but somebody said, "They're Japanese."

And you look and you see the sun on the wings. And that's the first I knew about it. And of course, we didn't worry about any -- doing their regular jobs, you know. You immediately went to general quarters and . . .

SH: How was general quarters sounded on the *SHAW*? Was it a bell or . . .

ML: No, it was a --- well, I remember, the only thing I could remember is a lever on the bridge, you push it, you know, and that sounded the alarm. It wasn't a bell, it was, "Ahooga, ahooga," that type of thing. And we . . .

SH: Anything special . . .

ML: Of course, the magazines were locked where the ammunition was, you had, you know, we had to go find that key. This is how stupid we were. And the locks that went into the five inch that actually fired a projectile, you know, that fired the powder, they were locked up. And we ran around trying to find the magazine keys. Finally, you know, we just ripped it open. It was stupid.

SH: How long . . .

ML: Then we got them in and luckily, one of the officers come along and said to somebody, "Don't fire the guns," because we were in that filthy dry dock setting up on wooden blocks. If we'd had trained out there and fired them guns, we would have just killed that thing right off of them blocks. So we done away with that and we had two fifty caliber's, I think, and two thirty caliber machine guns, and that's what we started. Of course, we had to belt the ammunition. You know, we really weren't ready. So we were down in the forward magazine, no, in the mess hall, large mess hall. I don't know, there was probably ten or twelve of us and part of 'em were bringing the ammunition and the links, they had metal links. And you had a machine, and you laid these links in it and then the projectile slid in and held the links together. And then you feed that through the fifty caliber's, and it would automatically eject them links.

SH: So in other words, your normal battle station, of course, would have been on this number two gun?

ML: Yeah.

SH: And you went there when general quarters was start, sounded, but were told not to fire because of the recoil . . .

ML: Well, I was one of the guys trying to find that magazine keys, see.

SH: Okay.

ML: Originally. And then, of course, the word come around and then, you know, I can't remember who said any of this things, but somebody said, probably told me to go down there and start belting the ammunition, because I wasn't one of the senior person, probably a Second Class or First Class Gunner's Mates,

"Mike, take some men and go down there and get the ammunition ready." That's where I was at.

And we had no water aboard, you know. We were living, actually, in a barracks off the ship, and we ate there. We just came back during the day to work with the yard. We were in that dry dock because we had a collision outside the port. We were patrolling and another ship -- and I don't remember the name of it -- it was a large ship. We were a darkened ship and we came together and of course, at the last minute, everybody lit up and they swung, but they caught or upper up by the anchor. So that's what was being -- that's why we were in dry dock.

And the first bomb hit right -- it must have been right back of that mess, 'cause my shirt was just blown off of me. And from then on, from that minute that that bomb hit, until I was up on deck, I don't remember how I got there. I guess I went up the *SHAW*. I remember going up that hatch, but I don't remember them first few seconds after that bomb went off. But that's where I was and I don't know how many killed or anything, but that's where we were at, right where that, right forward of the bulkhead, the way I remember. That was where the first bomb hit and like I say, I only got paint chippings and I don't know what else in my back, not deep. And I got one chunk taken out of my right hip, which I didn't know at the time. And then we, you know, we went top side, we didn't know what to do then because we couldn't go down there and belt the ammunition again, so the only thing we could do -- now, I think there was a, I remember a, I think this ensign's name was Brown, Ensign Brown. I think he was the senior officer aboard that morning, so he told us to abandon ship, because we had no water to fight the fire and there was two other bombs that hit up there and they were burning the magazine. There was just no way we could stay and fight it.

SH: You had abandoned ship and left the ship at the time the magazine -- where were you when the magazine blew up?

ML: Sitting on the beach.

SH: Sitting on the beach. You were in a floating dry dock, as I recall, so it was completely dry then, and you climbed down a ladder to the dry dock?

ML: We, no, we, for some reason, we couldn't get off the way we normally did. Whether it was, whether that gangway or whatever it was, was blown off when the bomb hit, or whether the ship probably, you know, when that bomb hit. As I recall, we went off the fantail, into the water, which wasn't all that deep right there.

SH: Over the fantail.

ML: And either swam or walked to the beach.

SH: Did you go by rope or jump, or . . .

ML: I don't remember that. I probably jumped, but I don't really remember. For a while --- after a while, I think before that, you -- I think some of the people crawled lines over, you know, that were still -- the ship wasn't completely out. But after a while, the only way you could get off of there, probably because of the fire, mainly, was off the fantail.

SH: That was a tremendous explosion, what did . . .

ML: I don't remember the explosion that much, believe it or not. There was so much other stuff going on. I think probably what most of us was doing was watching the planes. You know, they were still attacking. Yeah, wasn't nothing we could do at the *SHAW*.

SH: Did any of you recall any crew or anybody around you firing back once you got off the, once you abandoned ship?

ML: No. Evidently . . .

SH: Or how about near approaches? A lot of people talk about how close they got. Do you have a particularly vivid memory of, of a plane going by.

ML: The ones coming in, yeah. Right down to the water.

SH: Can you paint a picture for us?

ML: Well, I seen a lot of ships that morning, especially the torpedoes. Now, they were still firing torpedoes at Battleship Row, after it was over. And they just seemed like it was coming from behind us, go down right on the water and let her go. And then you see 'em flying real low, everywhere, just shooting, not dropping bombs or anything, but firing their small arms at us, whatever their machine guns were. And I remember, there was a big roar, you know, finally got one of 'em, we hit one, somebody did and everybody stood up and applauded like mad. That's the only plane I seen got shot down the whole time. I don't know how many they lost, I never heard that. I'm sure they lost more than one, but they really had a field day. No -- practically no opposition. I don't understand why they didn't make a landing that day. Could have had the island if they had. And my understanding is they had the Marines with them in that battle group. They had 'em.

SH: Maybe this wasn't in their big plan and they didn't . . .

ML: No, it was, but the admiral decided against it, what I read. He really made a boo-boo, I think, for their side, not ours. Yeah, and the other big lucky thing was that the aircraft carriers were out. If it had been the carriers instead of the battleships, then it would have really been trouble.

SH: You're right there. So, here you were, on the beach and are there any other memories of the attack, or did things begin to wind down from there?

ML: Well, somebody told me -- I had a little cute story that I'll tell you. Second Class Gunner's Mate named Waters, he's a very good friend of mine, even today. We were setting on some kind of logs, or piling, or something, watching all this going on and he said, "Somebody -- you better check around," he said, "there's blood around here."

You know, so everybody checked. And he says, "Holy hell, it's me.

He was bleeding from his hip or something too. Then somebody came by and said, "Hey Mike, you're all, you're all bloody on the back!"

You know, I didn't know. So I don't know whether -- somebody told me where to go to get treatment, you know. They were --- just had a place set up in the hallways, that the hospital, corpsmen and doctors were there.

SH: And you just had to walk there?

ML: I, yeah, as I recall, I did. I might have rode there, but anyway, I got there, and then from there, I went up to Tripler, which wasn't completed, I don't think, in them days, 'cause I was out in a wing somewhere, sort of by itself. It wasn't actually connected to the hospital. And I guess I was there about a week before I decided -- I don't know why I couldn't take a shower before that. Anyhow, I was there three or four days, or a week, and finally I was able to take a shower, and that's when I found out I had a patch on my hip, didn't even know it was there.

SH: Nobody . . .

ML: It was stuck.

SH: . . . even changed it or anything?

ML: Yeah. So I soaked that off, and the doctor retaped it. My back was never, there was never any deep cuts in it. The only scar I got is really on my hip, my right hip.

SH: When did you rejoin the *SHAW*?

ML: Probably about a month after the attack, 'cause I didn't even know they were going to save it, you know.

SH: Yeah, that a pretty interesting story, can you tell -- do you have anything to share little bit about how it was patched up and how it felt going back to . . .

ML: Yeah.

SH: . . . the mainland . . .

ML: Yeah.

SH: . . . in a patched ship.

ML: Of course the whole bow was blown off . . .

SH: Right.

ML: . . . when it exploded. And I think somebody at the hospital told me, you know, that if I went down to the yard, to the base and what building to go to, they'd take my name and I could go back to the *SHAW*, or I could go to the *SHAW* and see if I could. So that's what I did, finally. And I went down there and checked into this office and told 'em I was off the *SHAW*. And they sent me down to the *SHAW*, and I don't remember where it was. It may have been back in that dry dock, where they put that false bow on it. Funny, I couldn't remember that. Anyhow, I went aboard, you know, told 'em I wanted to come back aboard, and they did all the paperwork. I just went back there and started working.

Everything from the galley, all the mess hall, and the chief's quarters, well, the whole bow was gone.

SH: Including your gun?

ML: Yeah, including the gun, right. And they put just a snubby little false bow on it and you've probably seen pictures of it. And but we had no navigational equipment, so we came back to Hunter's Point with a group of other ships that all we had to do is follow them.

My station, when we were under way, was helmsman. In those days, coming up there one morning at four o'clock, I had the four to eight watch and the captain's on the bridge and there's no O.D. Uh-oh, something's wrong. I didn't want to ask the captain what happened, but somebody -- he was right on this little bridge he had and somebody got close to me and I could ask them, "Where's the O.D. at?"

Says, "Up the mast, all the way up. He done lost that convoy. And the old man, he called the captain, and the old man said, 'Go up there and stay 'til you find it.'"

But we didn't have anything to tell us how close we were to shore, you know. He was worried about running aground or anything. So I think about six o'clock, we finally found 'em. And this guy come down, he was almost froze to death. I don't remember his name, but I bet he never forgot that.

After that, why, it was, we stayed with 'em closer and we probably could only make a certain amount of speed too. We couldn't -- if we got lost, we couldn't catch up. They weren't going to wait for us. You know, that captain was really worried like that. But we got back and when we went into Hunter's Point, they took everything off that ship, including the engines, built a new bow and of course, they modernized as much, everything that they could, and that's when we got, I think, twenty millimeters. First we got 1.1s, which were English. We didn't have anything that size. Later on, we got forty millimeters. And got all the radar equipment that was available and sonar, and all of that. They spent seven million dollars, and that was a lot of money in those days, to rebuild that thing.

SH: When she was rebuilt, what were your duties, when she was rebuilt? Did you go back to number two gun?

ML: Yes. I was second class by that time. Maybe not yet, I don't remember. But after that, then we made a couple trowelings to here and back, make sure everything was working right. Then we went back to join the fleet. I think the first action was Guadalcanal, if I recall. Making a landing there.

We were convoying some cargo ships up there. That's mostly what that ship did the rest of the time I was on it. We island hopped, you know. As they would secure them, then we'd move up and move supplies up. At Guadalcanal, we were in there off loading, and there was some torpedo planes from Japan come in, plus fighters. I think there was thirty or forty torpedo planes and I don't remember how many fighter escorts they had. But they, the planes --- see, Guadalcanal was secured at that time, so the planes from Guadalcanal shot down all their fighters before they even got there. But all the other ones got through. Well, we got under way, of course, and we got that

word and we were steaming. I just stood there and watched that one torpedo plane come right in at us, dropped this torpedo, and I swear it was heading right for number two gun. Now, I don't know whether it went too low, or whether the captain turned the ship, what happened, but it never hit. As a matter of fact, we didn't get one hit that whole day on any ship, which was amazing.

SH: When you look back at the wartime experiences after a number of years, what's the most vivid memory that you have?

ML: Well, it would have to be the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

SH: And what about that?

ML: Just the amount of destruction that was caused there, you know, in a couple hours, to lose all them ships. Right at that time, I didn't think about the men, of course, that's very important, but just to be able to look out over there and see all them battleships and everything, just going. We thought, I thought that we saved most of them. I thought they were gone.

SH: We only have a couple of minutes. How did that make you feel?

ML: Like everybody else, mad as hell, at that time. I can't say that, you know, that I'm mad at the Japanese people any more. It's like any war, it's the government that does this, it's not the people. It's all right. It was two emotions. One was anger and the other was fear. And I guess you never get over either one completely. Hopefully it'll go away, or it's going away.

SH: Well, Mr. Lowey, I'd really like to thank you very much for a really interesting conversation and for taking the time to share your memories and your feelings with us.

ML: Hey, you're certainly welcome. I like to do it.

SH: So am I.

ML: Glad I'm here to do it. (Chuckles)

END OF INTERVIEW